



connections
FOR THE HOMELESS

**Community Support
for
The Margarita Inn**

About Connections for the Homeless



Shelter evolution

October 1985 - March 2020: 18 beds in a congregate shelter (male identifying only), 12 hrs

May 2020: 300 people in 3 hotels, 24/7, all household configurations and identities

Summer 2020: 200 rooms at one large hotel

October 2020: Reduced census through RRH and moved everyone to the Margarita Inn



Today, the Margarita Inn, with 45 rooms, houses up to 65 residents.

The Margarita Inn today

- 24/7 hotel-based shelter (aka fixed-site, non-congregate shelter)
- Individual rooms that accommodate any household configuration
- 5 former guest rooms converted to office space
- Intense on-site service model
 - Physical and mental health services (MD, RN, LCSW)
 - 3 meals/day provided by combination of volunteers and local restaurants
 - Housing case management – discharge planning from day one
 - Transportation, benefits enrollment, life-skills support, etc.
 - Recreational and community building activities
- Partnerships with other service providers
 - Substance/alcohol use disorders, harm reduction
 - Art therapy
 - Employment support
 - And more...



Demographics (current participants)

- Gender identity: 46.5% Female, 53.5 % Male
- Racial identity: 76% Black, 17% White, 5% AIAN, 2% API
- Ethnicity: 95% Non-Hispanic, 5% Hispanic
- Largest age group: 55 and older
- Currently serving: 6 minor children, 3 transition-aged youth

Results

- **Outcomes**

- 78% exit to a housing solution— nearly double from before the pandemic when we operated a congregate shelter
- We serve about 180/year
- Average length of stay 8 to 10 months but have had outliers >1,000 days
- \$30,000/bed/year

- **Challenges as we move forward**

- Insufficient shelter stock in the region
- Funding operations in a new environment that is much more expensive than older models
- **Lack of affordable/supportive housing solutions**

Context: About the City of Evanston

- High-income region
- Large income disparities
- Long-term segregation
- Very participatory City Council processes
- Geographically-based wards



What we needed to accomplish: “The Three- Legged Stool”

Zoning

- Antiquated zoning code
- No “clean” definition of what we were doing

Licensure

- No (easily identifiable) licensure models for shelter

Good Neighbor Agreement

- No neighborhood association to partner with



(for reference only: two-legged stools!)

When we started (February 2021)

In our favor

- History in the community and community self-perception
- Established site operations
- Relationships with elected officials
- Real expertise
- Willing seller

Working against us

- Lack of communications infrastructure
- Politics and municipal staff turnover
- Perception of our motivation
- Confluence of this operation and uptick in street homelessness (due to pandemic)
- Naivete

What we wish we knew then

Political (vs administrative) process (focus on the votes)

The need for cover for decision-makers (so they can respond to real political concerns)

Skepticism about our expertise (gasp!)

The sheer amount of resources needed (time, money, energy, motivation)

**As we
progressed,
we learned
and adapted**

In our favor

- Community's growing weariness with NIMBYs (TSTP) and their messaging
- Community and partner agency backing
- Hired guns
- Growth of operational expertise over time
- Eventual support of key elected officials

Working against us

- Unending energy and enthusiasm of TSTP
- Huge financial drain
- Non-expert opinions given the same weight as our expertise
- Lengthy bureaucratic zoning process

Faction-based communication and engagement strategies

Influencers
(police, City
staff, neighbors)

- **Goals:**
 - Deploy supporters
 - Neutralize (or wear out) opposition
- **Strategies:**
 - Transparency
 - Willingness to engage
 - Willingness to listen

Decision-
makers
(legislators)

- **Goal:**
 - Votes
- **Strategies:**
 - Establishing expertise
 - What if we didn't do it (and there is no plan B)
 - Shift responsibility to community rather than just the agency

Position-based communication and engagement strategies

Hard-core supporters

Goal: Deploy

- Lots of communications
- T-shirts are a real thing!
- Simple, consistent narrative
- Engagement against opponents
- Other engagement opportunities for them to support

Neutral to skeptical

Goal: Convert

- Welcoming them into the space
- Inviting them for neighbor engagement opportunities
- Corrections to misinformation without repeating lies
- Transparency and authenticity in answers to questions

Hard-core opponents

Goal: Neutralize

- Limited ROI
- Limited correction of misinformation
- Continuous invitations to engage, no expectations

Communications & cultivation vehicles

For the public:

- Listening sessions & more listening sessions
- Propagating truth through all channels including news media

For the police:

- Staff/police surveys and “Coffees with the Cops”
- Find our allies and work with them

For decision-makers:

- Weekly meeting with our Council Member
- Invitations to tours for all Council Members
- Partnership with staff through zoning and licensing processes
- Voluntary creating of a Good Neighbor Agreement
- Creation of a Good Neighbor Advisory Council

This is what success looked like (May 2023)

- Clever slogan
- Branding branding branding
 - Yard signs
 - T-shirts
 - Social media
- Number of supporters visually outweighed detractors



Key allies

- **City of Evanston: A partnership**
 - Councilmembers
 - City staff (most of them)
- **Fellow service providers**
 - Many years of relationship building
- **Our donors, volunteers, and local residents**
 - YIMBYs came on strong
- **Our Continuum of Care**
 - Cook County (Pres., staff and electeds)
- **Some local press**



Current state

Where we are right now:

Zoning and licensure obtained

Purchase near completion

Lawsuits pending against the City and seller

Creation of the GNA Advisory Committee underway

Where the community is right now:

Supporters are very happy

Opposition is very quiet

Still some questions

Fortitude Community Outreach

Dawn R. Broers, PhD, LCSW

Executive Director

Who We Are

- Street Outreach
- Emergency Overnight Accommodations
- Rapid Rehousing
- Shelter Diversion



History

- Began 2019—PADS model sheltering
- 2021—plans to construct shelter
- 2022—soaring construction costs led plan to purchase building instead
 - Rezoning blocked
 - Council encouraged return to construction project with promise to help fund
- 2023—Council demanded police free access in return for funding

Bad Timing

- Kankakee leaders:
 - Focused on development
 - New messaging:
 - Too many social services in City of Kankakee
 - Homelessness is a “county problem”
- Result:
 - Called for a moratorium on approving any shelters
 - Campaign of misinformation
 - Homeless are all drunks ruining downtown
 - Fortitude is shipping homeless in from other states
 - Homeless are coming to Kankakee just to stay at the shelter
 - There was no “homeless problem” before Fortitude
 - People of power repeatedly commenting in council meetings
 - Guests arrested on public property before shelter opened in the evening
 - Watched all the time: drive bys, camera across street

Decision

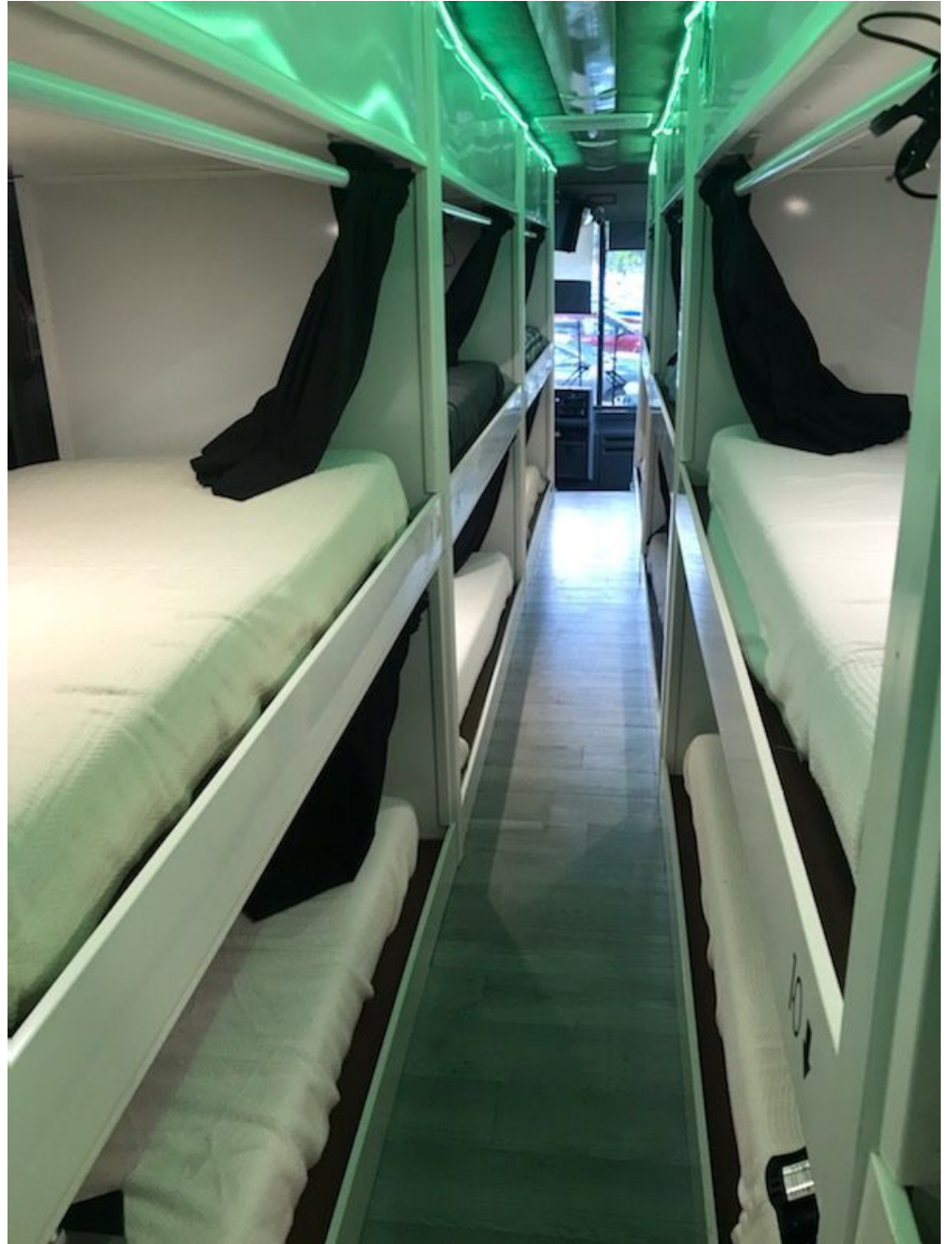
- Spring 2023—
 - Abort construction plans
 - Discontinue service in Kankakee and look to neighboring Bradley
 - Likely would mean no shelter for fall 2023

A New Plan

- Dignity Bus
 - 45' converted coach bus
 - 19 full beds on board
 - Private pods with tablet, internet, light, plugs, USB & C ports, personal fan
 - Wheelchair lift with one accessible bed
- No permits needed
- Reduces NIMBY
- Solves proximity issue with mobility

The Night Fort





Catch 22's...

- Protect privacy rights
- Call police for safety
- Informing public who support
- Obtain advocacy
- Appease law enforcement
- “Incidents” fed into negativity
- Negativity toward public officials
- Alienate decision-makers